

Interview with Ernest Thorp

VR2-A-L-2009-042.3

Excerpt from Interview # 3

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Tell us about your interrogation.

Thorp: (laughs) Well, looking back it, now maybe isn't so bad, but at the time, I thought the interrogation was one of the worst parts of my life, as far as being a prisoner of war was concerned. I mean, from the standpoint of treatment, food, solitary confinement, the questions they ask, the things they accuse you of, of being a spy, and the spies were shot, and if you didn't answer certain questions if you was a Japanese prisoner they cut your fingers off, and stuff of that nature.

The interrogator, I thought was real clever. Sometimes he could be like a lion, and another time he could be like a lamb, and the idea, of course, was to get you to talk, just talk. And of course when you're in (laughs) solitary confinement like I was, where you can talk to no other American or anybody that speaks English, you looked forward to talk to somebody. And then at night you'd hear people screaming. Now, whether that was on purpose or not or whether they was actually screaming to get out, be away from that camp, do anything to get out. You wondered, What in the world is going on? So when the German interrogator would get you to talking, in other words, he'd get you talking about your family. And of course you aren't supposed to do that. You aren't supposed to say nothing but your name, rank, and serial number.

One thing that kind of got me was we got to talking about religion. (laughs) And I thought, well, why would we get to talking about religion, and here I am a POW? But I mentioned some church, and said, "I'm a Methodist." And he pointed his finger right in my face and says, "That's military information." I said, "Well, why is that military information? It's on my dog tag, or the *P* that says Protestant." And then he got off onto another subject.

But he wanted to know how I got there, what crew I was with, what kind of plane I flew, what was the bomb load, who was the other crew members. And I cannot tell him because I did not know the other crew members, only the other

pilot. And he said, “Well, how do we know you were shot down and picked up out of the North Sea? Maybe you could be a spy, and we shoot spies.” And all this ring around the rosie. Then there’d be days he’d come by that he wouldn’t take me in at all. And I was looking forward to just getting out of that cell.

DePue: Was this a dark cell?

Thorp: It wasn’t dark, but nothing to read, nothing to do, just an eight-by-ten room, you know, enough to lay down in, and they’d give you bread and water—bread and hot water in the morning, a slice of bread at noon with jelly on it, and maybe another slice of bread or some soup with greasy water, and that’s all. No shaving. And they was very slow about letting you go to the bathroom. You was in misery and agony and nothing to think about but that. The thing I thought was my salvation as far as a minor concern was a church bell and a clock that would ring the hours and the half-hours. I knew what the time was. I’ll have to admit, people who can stay in solitary confinement and exist and keep their mind has to have a real strong ability and personality and mindset, because I personally don’t think I could have stood thirty days of solitary confinement. Maybe I could have, but a week was all I wanted, and I thought that was more than enough. (laughs)

DePue: So seven days?

Thorp: I think it was about—yeah.

DePue: Roughly?

Thorp: Roughly, yeah.

DePue: Was there any torture involved?

Thorp: No. There was no torture. Nothing physically was laid on me at all, just threats. “We don’t do that, but...”—you know, like cut the finger—“We don’t do that, but...” Well, what will he do? (laughs) You know, what can he do? But what got me, though, was going through all that, and all I had to do was confirm that I was on Arey’s crew.

DePue: On what crew now?

Thorp: On Arey—he was the first pilot. I was on that crew. “Oh,” he says, “that’s fine. We’ll let you out.” And he stood up, come around, shook my hand, and he says, “Thorp, you’re a good soldier. Would you like to have a book to read? We’ll go back to your cell, we’ll open up the windows, and we’ll let you some hot water so you can shave, and would you like to have a book to read?” And I said yes. “What will it be? I’d like to have a Bible.” He said, “*Ja, ja*,” he says, “a good choice.” Well when he said I was a good soldier, I could not believe it, because to me, he was anything but a gentleman. But he was a true German officer, he was doing his job, but all I had to do was confirm that I was on Arey’s crew.